

Universal Accessibility

Best Practices and Guidelines

Architectural Services Department 



Preface

Research Report on "Universal Accessibility: Best Practices and Guidelines"

Hong Kong similar to many other Countries is becoming an aging society. The proportion of our elderly is increasing rapidly. It is estimated that the elderly population in Hong Kong will increase to 21.5% of the total population by 2026. Since the 1970's, the Hong Kong Government has developed services for the elderly; and in 1994 adopted the "Aging in Place" policy regarding elderly services.

The concept of "Aging in Place" entails that the built environment provides a variety of choices in living arrangements, as well as be adaptable to the changing needs and health circumstance of residents without requiring drastic environmental changes. This concept can be further elaborated to encourage the elderly and people with disabilities to independently enjoy their living environment, instead of being restricted by potential physical barriers. It is understood that confining a person only in indoor activities is not a healthy habit, especially to people with disabilities and the elderly.

One of the major aims of a Barrier-free and Accessible environment is to facilitate and promote a healthy life style for all. The Concept of "Universal Design", "Inclusion by Design" and "Design-for-All" is to be the essence. Universal Accessibility is not a trend, but an enduring design approach which assumes that the range of human ability is ordinary, not special. It is all about integrating the continuum of the micro-and macro-perspectives of the surrounding world. It embodies universality by incorporating accessible facilities as well as accessible building features and equipment which, to the greatest extent possible, designs that can be used by everyone, regardless of age and physical abilities.

The approach to Universal Accessibility recognizes

that accessible systems, reliable information sources, and enabling environments can maximize choice and enhance the ability of a wider range of the population including the elderly and people with disabilities to live Independently, Proactively and hence Enjoyably.

The Architectural Services Department is to be highly commended for taking such initiative to research and publish this Report on "**Universal Accessibility: Best Practices and Guidelines**", possibly the first of its kind in Hong Kong. The design considerations and best practice standards will provide most useful and cutting edge guidelines for professionals and architectural practitioners in their pursuit of a socially responsive building design.

A barrier-free, accessible and user-friendly environment is the ideal to reach in any community. Our aim is to work towards an environment that is non-handicapping, that promotes freedom of choice and independence, and respects the individuals' right to live a full life with dignity irrespective of age and disability. This Research Report by the Architectural Services Department will greatly contribute towards achieving this common goal, thus is to be congratulated for initiating such major steps towards building an accessible and quality environment for a quality future for the people of Hong Kong.

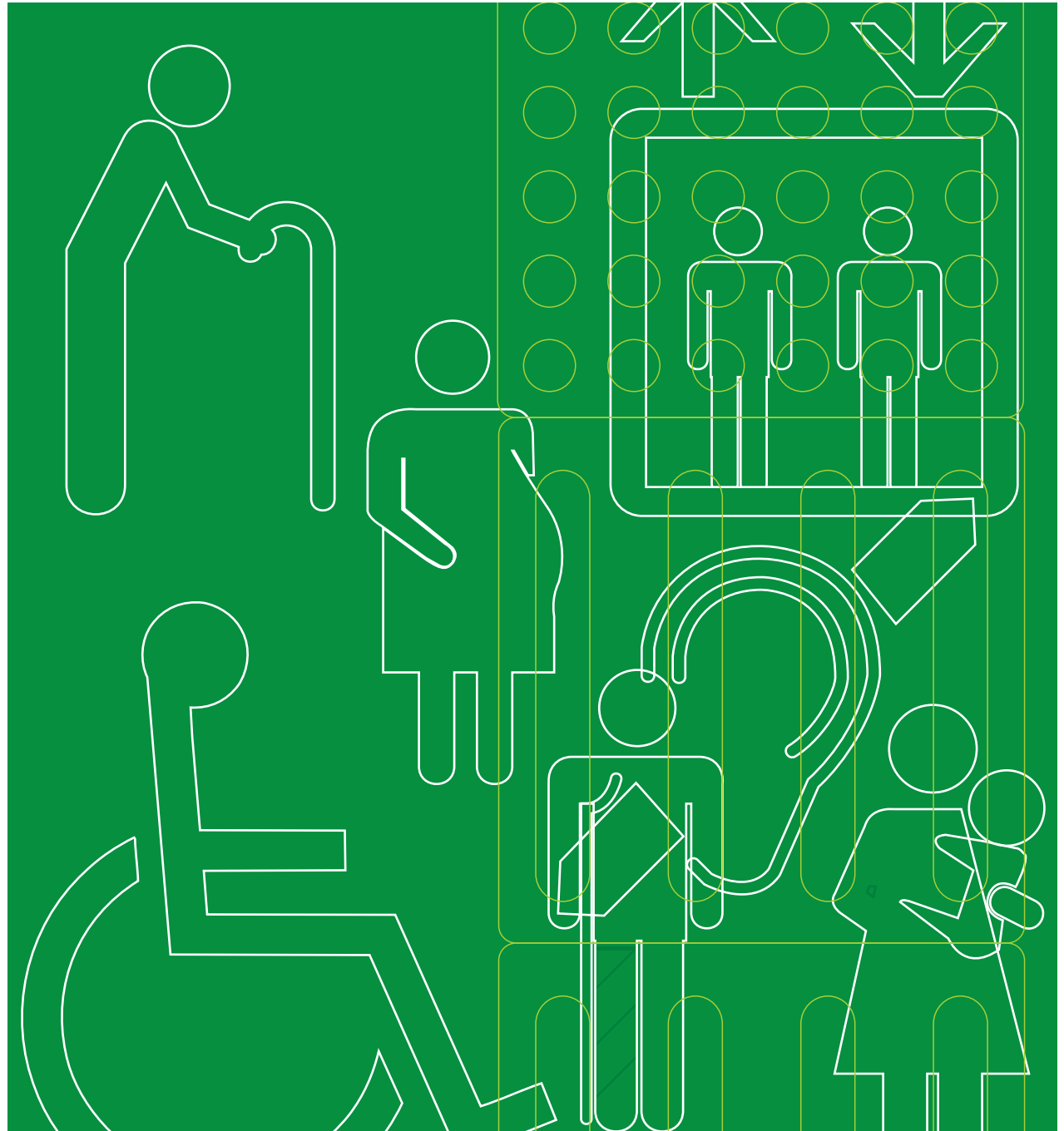
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Introduction



1.1 Background

1.1.1 Hong Kong Profile

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Hong Kong is a dynamic city and nothing remains static for long. This is true with our population status. According to the household survey conducted in 2003 by the Census and Statistics Department of HKSAR Government, the elderly population in Hong Kong is on the upward trend. The percentage of total population with the age of 65 and above in 2003 was 11.7% i.e. 369,300 people. The projected percentage of population aged 65 and over in mid 2031 is 24% and the aging population trend is also reflected by the median age of the population increasing from 37 in 2001 to 46 in 2031.

This, together with the survey result from a report on Persons with Disabilities and Chronic Diseases published in 2001 by the Census and Statistics Department, give a picture of the changing population profile in Hong Kong. The report estimated that the percentage of total population with disability, that is, restriction in body movement, visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, mental illness

The issue of disability is a degree of relativity to a fit and able-bodied adult in his lifetime. A fit person who has twisted his ankle or suffered from more serious injury could be considered as temporarily disabled in some aspects. The temporary disablement implies that the person cannot negotiate steps and changes in level without crutches or even a wheelchair is required for access. An infant has to be taken care of by an adult who has to rely on an "assisted device" like a pram or pushchair. Some are dependent on assisted devices for a long period of their life e.g. a short sighted person has to rely on corrective glasses and as people get older, the visual impairment become more apparent. At the other end of the scale, there are ambulant people with disabilities and wheelchair users.



Hong Kong: a dynamic city



People in transit

1.1.2 Accessibility in Hong Kong

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In the past, the accessibility needs of the above sectors are sometimes overlooked, as most provisions tend to cater for the fit and able-bodied who are most mobile and vocal. If access to a facility is not barrier free, it would prohibit easy use. In this age of advance information and technology, we should strive to build a sustainable environment with facilities and services that facilitate universal accessibility.

In order to address the accessibility issues, various concepts and design principles have been developed and promoted under the umbrella of “Universal Design” and “Inclusion by Design”. Designers around the world have taken up the challenge and provided solutions to facilitate accessibility. For example, more thought is given to the design of automatic doorways and ramps to address various groups of users and to facilitate accessibility. Accessible toilet facilities are designed with baby safety seats, adult and child size fittings, and special support rails for the elderly and special support rails for the elderly and infirm.

In Hong Kong, universal accessibility is gradually improving. The statutory requirements on disabled access have been in force since 1984. Such requirements were revised to provide barrier free access to buildings in 1997. Furthermore, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, which came into operation in 1996, gives the legal reasons for the people with disabilities to fight for equal opportunities and against discrimination.

Hong Kong is a place with limited land resources therefore the use of every inch of land, especially in the urban area, has to be maximised. Efforts to provide barrier free access in an already cramped built up area is not easy. This has resulted in solutions based on minimum provisions which have been found to be insufficient and inefficient. In recognising the inadequacies, the barrier free access requirements are now under review.



Access to the top



Access on elevated walkway



Access on ground

1.1.3 Initiative of Architectural Services Department

1.2 Objectives

1.3 Study Methods

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People with different abilities are part of our community. They, like all others are entitled to play an active role in the community life. Thus, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has encouraged community care and integration. With these two initiatives which coincide with current philosophy in “Universal Design”, notions of diversity in design and caring for people of all ages and abilities are promoted. The needs of a wider spectrum of people are addressed by inclusive design. In consideration of higher public expectations, changing population profile and to facilitate better access opportunities, the Architectural Services Department (ArchSD) has set up a working group to study the issues and prepare a paper on the subject.

1.2 Objectives

The overall purpose of the study is to promote “Universal Design” for ArchSD public buildings and open space projects focusing on planning, building and maintaining an accessible environment.

The specific objectives are:-

- To increase awareness of universal accessibility issues;
- To initiate innovative design towards a more accessible and sustainable environment; and
- To recommend best practices and design guidelines on universal accessibility to facilitate the widest spectrum of users to access public buildings and services independently.

1.3 Study Methods

The study makes reference to Legislation and Standards in Hong Kong, Universal Design concept as well as local and overseas examples. Visits have been made to a number of completed projects. A comprehensive study and user feedback survey of one public building and one open space project have been conducted. Meetings are held with user groups to review accessibility requirements and user needs. Professionals such as occupational therapist and architect working in the field to improve access for the people with disabilities and to promote Universal Design concept have also been interviewed.

To further illustrate the best practices on universal accessibility, a photo gallery consisting of good local and overseas examples has been established on ArchSD’s intranet for easy reference and some examples have been incorporated into this study paper.

The study focuses on generic issues. Findings and design guidelines have been documented.

Based on the feedback from the users during the surveys and the interviews, together with the reappraisal of completed ArchSD projects, indicators for continual improvements have been established. Best practices and guidelines are now recommended. They would be useful tools to assist designers, administrators, operators and users in achieving the objectives for universal accessibility in future projects.